

Mr. Garrison's Letter—Read at the  
Dedication of Cosmian Hall, Flor-  
ence, Mass. March 25, 1874.

BOSTON, March 22, 1874.

DEAR MR. CONNOR:—

I thank you for the invitation extended to me, in your letter, to attend the dedication of "Cosmian Hall," in Florence, the present week. Believing that the object of such dedication is, in spirit and purpose, directly in the interest of religious freedom and progress, on a broad and catholic platform, it would give me great pleasure to be present on the occasion; but that pleasure I am obliged to forego, in consequence of some local engagements.

It is many years since I saw the general emptiness of sectarian creeds and ceremonial observances, and was able to emancipate myself from all denominational trammels. As no body of men can be answerable for me at the bar of Eternal Rectitude, none shall control my liberty to think, speak, and act, on any matter touching the present or the future life. The idlest of all cries to me is that of "heresy," because all claim of human infallibility is profane egotism. Seeing that the heresy of one age is the recognized faith of the next, a new heresy is to be hailed as the germ of a fresh growth; or, at least, as something better than dead formalism or piety in "silver slippers." In the judgment of Rome, all Protestants are heretics; but how, on the Protestant ground of the sacred right of private judgment in all matters pertaining to religious faith and practice, there can be any Protestant heretics, because of differences of opinion, is what I do not understand. As a dogma, nothing is gained by substituting the authority of the Bible for that of the Pope; for what the Bible really teaches is to be settled by each reader for himself, and the result of this liberty is an endless variety of interpretations.

In order that Protestantism may stimulate to the boldest utterance and sturdiest non-conformity, whereby all possible mental and moral growth may be a resultance, there is yet a vast amount of Romanism to be eliminated from it. We are steadily making progress in this winnowing process; and I hail, as in the service of truth, every indication that the right of dissent is becoming more and more regarded as an inalienable right, and that dissent itself is not to be met with proscription or menace, but with courtesy and reason.

I am convinced that the readiest way to break the sorcery power of bigotry is a general co-operation in measures of radical reform and practical righteousness, having in view the happiness and welfare of the people; neither lingering in the past, nor concerning ourselves greatly about the distant future, but acting in "the living present," looking at its needs, nobly discharging its responsibilities, and conscientiously performing all the duties it imposes.

The various movements for the promotion of temperance, peace, moral reform, antislavery, impartial suffrage, popular education, scientific knowledge, etc., etc., have done much toward breaking down the old partition walls which for so long a period kept those who, but for them, "like kindred drops had mingled into one." In the presence of a great wrong to be redressed or an awful curse to be removed, all theological dogmatism becomes an impertinence, and every earnest worker in the field of reform will eschew it.

I have many pleasant and tender recollections of Florence in its early settlement, where were gathered together some of the best and freest spirits of the age.

Yours for going forward,

WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON.

Ms. A.1.1 v.8, p.41B

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